



NEWS



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2nd attempt to repeal San Bernardino County fire tax goes to voters in June

Steve Scauzillo, SAN GABRIEL VALLEY TRIBUNE

Posted: January 12, 2022 at 12:14 am



FILE – Seven boats were destroyed and five others were damaged in a fire on Lake Arrowhead early Friday morning, July 16, 2021 fire officials said. A fire protection zone special tax is once again up to the voters. The San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday, Jan. 11, 2022 put the measure asking for its repeal on the June 7, 2022 ballot. (Photo courtesy of San Bernardino County Fire Department)

For the second time in as many years, registered voters in unincorporated San Bernardino County, as well as the cities of San Bernardino, Upland, Twentynine Palms and Needles, will decide the fate of an existing fire district tax.

The San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously Tuesday, Jan. 11, to place the citizen-initiated measure to repeal the tax on the June 7 statewide primary ballot.

A simple majority would eliminate what's known as the annual FP-5 property assessment, a 2018 tax approved by the supervisors that expanded the fire protection zone to all county unincorporated areas and four cities without their own fire departments. The tax is currently about \$162 per parcel.

Without the revenue from the tax, officials say, the **San Bernardino County Fire** Protection District would lose \$42.7 million per year, an 18% drop in its budget. Fire officials say the loss would reduce fire protection and emergency medical services, while forcing closure of 15 to 17 fire stations across the district.

The county Registrar of Voters in October 2021 determined the measure qualified for the ballot after residents — aided by funding from a libertarian group, the Red Brennan Group — had collected 8,868 valid signatures. The supervisors opted not to adopt the measure into law or call a special election in April and instead placed it on the June ballot.

Some residents feel the special fire protection assessment was initially approved in violation of the state constitution because it did not go to the voters and get two-thirds voter approval, as required for new taxes by Proposition 218. Instead, the county approved it after not enough property owners sent in letters of opposition.

A first attempt to repeal the tax made it to the November 2020 ballot but failed by about 9,000 votes. Measure U lost, with 52% of the voters against the repeal, and 48% in favor.

Proponents of the new measure say they wanted the county to repeal the tax immediately, then if needed, place a tax measure on the ballot requiring two-thirds voter approval. The supervisors did not consider that suggestion.

“This was a tax passed on rural and poorer communities in our county without a required vote,” said Chad Keel, an associate of the Red Brennan Group, who spoke at the meeting. “It is not that we are against the tax or the fire department; we are against the way the board and the fire union went about adopting the tax.” The tax violates the state Constitution, Keel said.

“It is illegal,” he said. “So why should the board ask voters to repeal an illegal tax?”

The board did not respond to Keel’s comments. However, the allegation that the tax is unconstitutional was rejected by the courts, said David Wert, county spokesman, in an email.

Tom Murphy, also a member of the group, said in an interview Monday that he expected the supervisors’ action.

He said many cities and counties in 2020 used the ballot to ask for voter approval of taxes.

“That is the way they (county of San Bernardino) are supposed to go about it,” Murphy said.

If the county had repealed the tax Tuesday, it could have made up the funding gap out of other revenue, Murphy said.

“The board has the ability to cover that gap and no fire stations would close and no firemen would go home,” he said.

The FP-5 revenue pays for a substantial portion of San Bernardino city fire services. If it were to go away, the city would have to close four out of nine fire stations, Munsey said. Upland needs the FP-5 funding for 1.5 fire stations. And Twentynine Palms is 100% dependent on FP-5, he said.

<https://www.dailybulletin.com/2022/01/11/2nd-attempt-to-repeal-san-bernardino-county-fire-tax-goes-to-voters-in-june/>

Investigation underway after body found inside burned trailer in San Bernardino

Kristen de Leon, KTLA 5

Posted: January 11, 2022 at 5:01 pm

No picture

An investigation is underway after a body was discovered inside a burned trailer in San Bernardino, authorities announced Tuesday.

Firefighters from the **San Bernardino County Fire** Department responded to a trailer fire just before 12:50 a.m. Sunday on the 6000 block of Cajon Boulevard, officials said.

After extinguishing the fire, crews found a deceased subject inside the trailer, according to a news release from the San Bernardino County Sheriff-Coroner Department.

The identity of the dead person is still pending, officials said.

It's unclear what led to the fire, but investigators with the Sheriff's Department are working with arson investigators in the investigation.

Anyone with information about the incident is asked to contact Detective Cory Drost at 909-387-3589. Those who wish to remain anonymous can contact We-Tip at 800-78CRIME, or visit www.wetip.com.

<https://ktla.com/news/local-news/investigation-underway-after-body-found-inside-burned-trailer-in-san-bernardino/>

Doomed El Dorado firefighter's last words: trapped in a 'corner'

Brian Rokos, THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Posted: January 11, 2022 at 11:41 pm



San Bernardino National Forest firefighter David Cruz lowers his head at a memorial service for Charles “Charlie” Morton, the U.S. Forest Service firefighter who was killed on Sept. 17, 2020, while fighting the El Dorado fire. Morton died when he was overcome by flames when hiking alone to assess spot fires, a new Forest Service report said. (Photo by Terry Pierson, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

The U.S. Forest Service plan on the 18th day of the El Dorado fire that would burn 22,680 acres and destroy five homes in San Bernardino and Riverside counties was to cut a fire break that would protect Angelus Oaks and ignite backfires to steer the flames away from Big Bear.

About 7 p.m. on Sept. 17, 2020, after wind gusts estimated at 60 mph cast embers over the bulldozer line and Highway 38, Charlie Morton, a crew boss on a Forest Service Big Bear hotshot team, left his crew and walked alone along the unburned side of the bulldozer line to inspect the spot fires.

He radioed his captain that his crew, backed up by a couple of engine companies, could extinguish these new threats.

But just then, the wind kicked up again, and flames burning through vegetation growth that had accumulated over the years because of an aggressive fire-suppression policy grew more intense. The captain asked Morton whether he’d be able to get out. “We’ll see,” Morton replied.

Moments later, Morton radioed that he was trapped in a “corner.” That was the last anyone would hear from him.

Hours later, about 11:40 p.m., searchers found Morton’s body with his scorched fire shelter next to him, barely unfolded. Almost all of Morton’s clothing was burned off his body. He was still wearing what was left of his pack. Flames had consumed the wooden handle of the hoe that he carried.

Two reports released this month by the Forest Service detail not only the on-the-ground actions and circumstances that preceded the death of 39-year-old Morton but also the Forest Service’s policies, culture and a lack of experienced firefighters that officials worried contributed to Morton’s death and may put others at risk on future wildfires.

The reports generated through interviews of firefighters and others — the El Dorado Organizational Learning Report and El Dorado Learning Review Narrative, posted on wildfirelessons.net — do not specifically blame any one person, tactic or policy for Morton’s death.

That could become important as an attorney prepares the defense for Refugio and Angelina Jimenez, who were charged with involuntary manslaughter and arson crimes after authorities said the pyrotechnic device they used in their gender-reveal photoshoot at a Yucaipa park started the fire on Sept. 5.

San Bernardino County District Attorney Jason Anderson has said he can prove a direct line from the mishap to Morton's death.

The Jimenezes have pleaded not guilty to all charges. Messages were left Tuesday, Jan. 11, with their attorney, Michael Scafiddi, as well as Anderson seeking comment.

High winds 'out of nowhere'

For Oceanside native Morton and other crew members, Big Bear was their "turf" — even though few crew members could actually afford to live there — and they believed the mountain town had to be protected.

But the fire behavior San Bernardino Peak on the day of Morton's death was worrisome. The fire was heating up and lookouts were concerned the fire was going to threaten the Big Bear Lake area. Bulldozers were building lines behind Angelus Oaks, but that crew, after observing the fire, pulled out.

Even so, the operation to redirect the El Dorado fire into the burn scar of the 2015 Lake fire was going well ... until it wasn't.

"Out of nowhere, winds (some said it felt like 60 mile-per-hour gusts) appeared and blew spots across both Highway 38 and the bulldozer line," the narrative report said.

Firefighters who commonly worked in the San Bernardino National Forest would later comment that they were surprised by the intense fire behavior.

"Shortly after the second gust of wind, a strike team leader ... called for everyone to pull out off the line and disengage. What started as a walk turned into a downhill run. Cal Fire strike team members described a sense of panic as the fire intensity on the black side of the burn had increased dramatically and spot fires were growing in the (unburned area)."

Yet when Morton's crew members looked behind them, there was Morton "calmly using a (hose) to put out spots on his way down."

It was then that Morton headed back toward the bulldozer line to get a better look at how many spot fires had crossed it.

Morton radioed his recommended plan of attack and followed that up with his uncertain "We'll see" comment to his captain.

And then something went terribly wrong.

The next time the captain radioed Morton, there was no response. "He then heard Charlie call in desperation, 'I'm in a corner.' "

The organizational learning report said that spinning whirlwinds, created by the extreme heat from the burning operation, seemed "to have formed at the very moment Charlie was walking along the dozer line, at his exact location as he was walking there."

How the Forest Service determined that this happened was unclear Tuesday, as Morton was the only witness.

Morton no longer responded to his captain's calls. Radio traffic about a missing firefighter began to spread through the crews on the mountain. The captain got in a truck with a superintendent and head back uphill, calling out for Morton on a loudspeaker. Morton's cell phone was pinged. Law enforcement helicopter crews attempted to use their heat sensors to locate Morton, but the heat from the flames made that impossible. One helicopter crew called out to Morton on its loudspeaker.

A safety officer and a medic considered hiking in to search for Morton. Conditions were so dangerous, the medic later said, that he used his phone to send a pin to another medic to mark his location, just in case he didn't make it back. Ultimately the pair called off their search after encountering a bedraggled engine company crew.

"The engine company members' eyes were watering, they were coughing and sputtering with snot pouring out of their noses. The way up the bulldozer line had been incredibly uncomfortable, hard to see, and dangerous. The hike did not seem survivable," the narrative report said.

Late that night, when conditions improved, a National Forest battalion chief and Big Bear fire captain took up the search, each taking one side of the bulldozer line.

"A quick reflection of light from an accorded and undeployed fire shelter caught (the battalion chief's) eye on the edge of the bulldozer line near a bend. They stopped 25 feet away and were able to determine that Charlie had not survived."

Forest Service officials called Morton's fiancée, Monica Tapia of Irvine, and told her they needed to see her.

Before they could arrive, Tapia had called a Forest Service superintendent.

"Charlie's fiancée told (him) to tell her that Charlie was OK, that he wasn't lost, that he was fine," the narrative report said.

But the superintendent just couldn't bear to deliver the bad news, so he handed off the phone. A support services worker told Tapia that Morton had died in the line of duty.

Forest Service troubles

The organizational learning report said Morton's death highlighted issues in the Forest Service, ones that are not new:

- Its fire behavior models cannot predict this kind of fire behavior and none of its analysts are trained to recognize under what conditions the spinning whirlwinds — called counter rotating vortex pairs — form.
- Agencies and organizations such as PG&E that use firefighting experts are enticing experienced Forest Service employees to leave with better pay and better work-life balance.
- The fire burned high accumulations of fuels that are difficult to extinguish. "Our current paradigm of treating fire as an enemy that must be defeated contributed to the condition of the forest at the time of the fire," the report said.

- Viewing fire as the enemy also may have had an influence on local resources “trying to protect their home turf” against that enemy, the report said. “We continue to ask our wildland fire responders to save communities that are becoming increasingly unsavable. At what point do we declare communities without any semblance of defensible space not worth the risk of trying to save under extreme fire behavior conditions?”

<https://www.sbsun.com/2022/01/11/doomed-el-dorado-firefighters-last-words-trapped-in-a-corner/>

Breaking News: Needles, CA: Crash involving two vehicles and a downed light pole along Needles Highway near Pashard Street.

Zachary Lopez, ZACHNEWS

Posted: January 11, 2022 at 7:29 pm



Source: San Bernardino County Fire District (Information):

Needles, California: A crash involving two vehicles and a downed light pole along Needles Highway near Pashard Street.

Initial reports came in before 7:00 p.m. PT on Tuesday, January 11th, 2022 of a crash into a power pole.

Medical Engine 32 from **San Bernardino County Fire** District along with Medical Ambulance 31 as well as Electric is responding.

Medical Engine 32 reports to Comm-Contner that two vehicles involved, moderate damages and contact electric.

Moment ago, the San Bernardino County Fire District tell ZachNews that there was no injuries and the pole was a light pole.

More information still coming into ZachNews.

<https://zachnews.net/2022/01/11/breaking-news-needles-ca-crash-involving-two-vehicles-and-a-downed-light-pole-along-needles-highway-near-pashard-street/>